

Macao Initiatives for the Protection of the Maritime Silk Roads and its Nomination for World Cultural Heritage

Maritime Silk Road International Cultural Forum

Macao

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The Maritime Silk Road was a maritime network of itineraries that served the multi-faceted exchanges between different nations, from the 2nd century BCE until the mid-late 19th century CE, before the shift of navigational technology from sail to steam boats and ships. Ancient people established the Maritime Silk Road, based on existing natural conditions, including ocean currents and monsoon winds, connecting major sea areas and coastal areas, particularly in the mid to low latitudes, using traditional navigation techniques. With the diverse heritage sites distributed alongside these routes, the Maritime Silk Road has intrinsic historical, artistic, and scientific values, as well as cultural, social, and even contemporary values, as it was also the beacon of important and positive interactions of great significance, among different regions and civilizations, during the 2,000-year-long history of sail navigation, especially in reference to the dissemination of religious beliefs, architectural styles, customs, and production techniques, also serving as a good example about the exchanges that happened between the world's civilizations across the oceans.

The Maritime Silk Road International Cultural Forum was held in Macao, China on 16-17 November 2022. The event was attended by over 100 representatives from many countries and regions, including illustrious delegates from mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Portugal, United States and Bangladesh, including representatives from international heritage institutions, such as UNESCO and ICOMOS, and the participation by representative members from Chinese cities along the Maritime Silk Road. Participants held in-depth discussions on the concept and value, protection and utilisation, sustainable development, international cooperation, and other topics concerning the Maritime Silk Road, and the following consensus was reached:

The project ‘The Silk Roads of Dialogue’, initiated by UNESCO since the 1980s, promotes the importance of the Maritime Silk Road as a heritage item of the cultural routes. In 2008, ICOMOS published ‘The Charter on Cultural Routes’, which significantly raised awareness about the value of large-scale cultural routes and the mechanism for joint World Heritage nomination. In 2014, the item “Silk Roads: The Routes Network of Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor” was inscribed on the World Heritage List, thereby materializing a concrete and referential example for the nomination of the Maritime Silk Road as World Heritage. The ‘UNESCO Expert Meeting on Maritime Silk Routes’ that was held in London (UK) in 2017, ‘The International Symposium of the Maritime Silk Road’ held in Macao in 2019 and several academic seminars that were organized in other countries in recent years have altogether laid a solid foundation for international cooperation related to the Maritime Silk Road.

We believe that the fruitful research results about the Maritime Silk Road also enabled important advancement in various fields, including history, archaeology, heritage conservation, anthropology, sociology, urban studies, ecology, and maritime studies. The continually emerging archaeological discoveries, together with the continually improved

scientific and technological means of heritage conservation, and the heritage conservation and sustainable development concepts that continue to evolve, have equally provided significant academic resources for the future conservation and research of the Maritime Silk Road.

We also see that the protection of the Maritime Silk Road heritage is currently confronted with some challenges. We take notice that the Maritime Silk Road heritage is facing a somewhat conservation crisis due to the inadequate recognition of the value of this route, as well as because of inappropriate heritage conservation methods, inefficient management, man-made impacts related to urban development pressures, and the necessary consideration that we should have about the use of more eco-friendly conservation techniques, which can be more respectful of natural factors, such as climate and coastline changes.

Therefore, the nomination of Maritime Silk Road as World Heritage, as well as its adequate conservation, effective management and revitalisation, is also a joint aspiration that we have, in order to continue to promote the exchange and mutual learning opportunities among the different civilisations, countries, societies, and cultures along the route, thereby enabling the joint protection of the maritime heritage that belongs to Humanity.

To this end, we are jointly launching the following initiatives:

First, to deepen international cooperation. The Maritime Silk Road, as a main axis within a complex transportation network, involves a geographical space covering most areas of the planet and relates to many of the distinct civilisations of the past 2,000 years of world history. Research on the protection of the Maritime Silk Road should therefore be supported by the entire world, including governmental entities, universities and civil organisations that can, and should, play a more contributing and concrete role.

Second, to consolidate the academic foundation. The academic research system about themes related to the Maritime Silk Road should be continuously improved in order to create a platform for specialized dialogue and an exchange that can also enable the sharing of the latest initiatives pursued in this field. The history and the present-day reality of the Maritime Silk Road should be analysed, including a deeper perception about its overall value and about the role that each of its historical components, which should be clarified in more specific terms.

Third, to promote the nomination process. Countries along the Maritime Silk Road are encouraged to prepare documents and thematic research, inviting UNESCO and ICOMOS to participate and provide technical advice and recognize the potential outstanding universal values of this heritage, thereby creating an operational framework for its nomination as World Heritage, while also developing the nomination of relevant heritage sites located in countries and regions along the Maritime Silk Road.

Fourth, to strengthen the heritage protection capacity. Joint efforts should be made to protect the Maritime Silk Road heritage and safeguard heritage items that might be eventually at risk. The latest developments in the field of oceanography, environmental science, climatology, and other natural sciences should be integrated, in order to more

actively respond to climate and maritime changes. High-tech and eco-friendly conservation materials and methods should be developed and applied.

Fifth, to build up professional teams. Capacity for research, management and protection of the Maritime Silk Road should be increased, through the hosting of relevant events, namely, seminars and training courses. Young scholars should be especially encouraged to participate in the protection and development of the Maritime Silk Road.

Sixth, to enhance digital surveys of heritage resources. Digital collection and analysis of heritage information about heritage should be carried out, in order to promote the organization of digital archives. A database of research documents on the archaeology, history, and anthropology related to the Maritime Silk Road should be established and a network platform should be created to promote the sharing of resources.

Seventh, to explore further revitalisation measures. Revitalisation and utilisation of the Maritime Silk Road heritage should be enhanced to facilitate the integration of this heritage into economic and social development and the renewal of respective communities. Efforts should be made to promote the values of the Maritime Silk Road, to expand its knowledge and increase its recognition, with the organization of more exhibitions and the improvement of interpretation resources, including a greater promotion of related intangible cultural heritage. Local communities should be empowered to participate in heritage protection and management, exploring, protecting and transmitting the traditional knowledge, while preserving the cultural memory of the sites.

We hope that, under the framework of common values, more countries and regions along the Maritime Silk Road can benefit from a greater and broader synergy for the research, protection and for the nomination of this Route to World Heritage, which is also an opportunity to promote more academic research and protection practices for maritime heritage around the world.